

Atlantic City Boardwalk
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Beachfront between Fredericksburg &
Maine avenues
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1161

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ATLANTIC CITY BOARDWALK

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- Location:** The boardwalk runs the length of the oceanfront from Fredericksburg Avenue north to the Absecon Inlet and lighthouse at Maine Avenue, a distance of over two-and-a-half miles, Atlantic City, Atlantic County, New Jersey.
- Present Owner:** Atlantic City
- Present Use:** Boardwalk (an outdoor promenade which fronts a commercial strip)
- Significance:** The boardwalk was the commercial heart of the city, lined by hotels and amusement piers; it served as the meeting point of the man-made amusements and man's encounter with the ocean.
- Description:** No more the wood structures of the 19th century, the present boardwalk is made entirely of concrete. Likewise, the amusement piers that once ran perpendicular from the boardwalk are also gone. The only remaining structure reminiscent of Atlantic City's peak years of attraction and prosperity during the early 20th century is the Atlantic City Convention Hall (HABS No. NJ-1130).
- History:** The Atlantic City Boardwalk, which has in many ways defined the character and success of the resort, did not originate as a purely commercial endeavor.¹ Atlantic City itself, on the other hand, was a commercial development from its conception--the joint creation of a Philadelphia-based railroad and land company.² The idea behind the first boardwalk in 1870 was to provide a footpath so that strollers would not return to hotels, trains, and businesses with sand in their shoes. A City Council resolution prevented the construction of buildings within 30 feet; although with approval one could build on the ocean side. The first boardwalk consisted of removable 12 foot sections with the boards running lengthwise on two-foot beams. This ten-foot-wide walkway sat on posts in the sand.
- The city built the next boardwalk ten years later, this time 14-foot wide, but still with boards running lengthwise, and still not elevated substantially above the sand. Boardwalk buildings, now permitted within 10 feet of the walkway (bathhouses 15 feet), were raised higher than the walk to accommodate high water. The Atlantic City directory documents that by 1883 more than 100 businesses abutted the boardwalk, not including the

¹ The following five paragraphs on the construction of Atlantic City's Boardwalks are drawn from Frank Butler, Frank Butler's Book of the Boardwalk (Atlantic City: Haines and Co., 1952), pp.2-14. Butler claimed many "firsts" for Atlantic City. He asserts that Atlantic City originated the oceanside boardwalk (p.1), as well as the rolling chair, and the postcard (copied from Germany).

² Charles Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea: The Rise and High Times of That Great American Resort, Atlantic City (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), pp.3-7. The Camden and Atlantic Railroad, and the Camden and Atlantic Land Company, were created by the same investors.

temporary stalls.³

A major winter storm in January 1884 induced the opening of a more solid boardwalk the following summer. Raised five feet above the sand, 20 feet wide, this third boardwalk changed to a design of crosswise boards. Businesses occupied both sides of the boardwalk, often enclosing the walkway. Despite the new height of the walk, the city neglected to include railings; The Atlantic Review reported in August, 1885 that "Nearly every day somebody falls off the Boardwalk. In nearly every instance, the parties have been flirting."

A September 1889 hurricane again caused the Boardwalk's reconstruction. This time the city began the long process of acquiring a 60 foot right of way, enabled by the state legislature to lay out a public street. The boardwalk's fourth reincarnation in May 1890 was now 24 feet wide, 10 feet high, with crosswise boards, and substantial railings. The city managed to prevent most building on the ocean side, but it was almost a decade before all the businesses were brought into line for these new policies.

The fifth and final boardwalk was in place in 1896, partially by making use of property easements. This walk was forty feet wide, had steel pilings and girders, and railings. Any pier had to be over 1000 feet long. The fifth walk has undergone several changes; the city had the steel piling encased in concrete in 1903, portions were moved out in 1907, the boardwalk is now 60 feet in some places, in 1914 the city added runways to accommodate rolling chairs, and the city introduced a herringbone pattern in 1916.⁴

The Atlantic City Boardwalk, however, had a significance far beyond its physical structure. It was the commercial heart of the city, lined by hotels and amusement piers; it served as the meeting point of the man-made amusements and man's encounter with the ocean. The author of an 1885 guide promoted people-watching opportunities: "Although the student of botany will find in Atlantic City a very limited field for his studies, still, if he turns his mind to the study of human nature he will find here plenty to do."⁵ Atlantic City's identity as a commercial destination overshadowed its other attractions, so that even the experience of the ocean and other "natural" recreations were packaged and produced. Charles Funnell, examining turn-of-the-century Atlantic City, asserts that the ocean was essentially an unfamiliar and frightening place, a frontier or wilderness. The

³ 52 bathhouses, four small hotels, four guesthouses, two piers, 15 restaurants, and numerous stores.

⁴ The builders of the five boardwalks were as follows: 1) George Bryant and William Weeks; 2) Henry Disston and sons; 3) labor hired by the city, E. V. Corson providing most materials; 4) John W. Bowen and Simon L. Wescoat; 5) the Phoenix Bridge Company. Frank Butler, Book of the Boardwalk (Atlantic City: Haines and Co., 1952), p.14.

⁵ Burk and McFetridge, A Complete Guide to Atlantic City (1885), p.17.

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amusements, on the other hand, were urban in character, as was the press of the crowds.⁶ The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey found the city to be "...a glittering monument to the national talent for wholesale amusement," adding that "...natural considerations are subordinated to one of the most fascinating man-made shows playing to capacity audiences anywhere in the world."⁷

The WPA Guide writers stressed the centrality of the Boardwalk to the Atlantic City experience--"Atlantic City is an amusement factory, operated on the straight-line, mass production pattern. The belt is the boardwalk along which each specialist adds his bit to assemble the finished product, the departing visitor, sated, tanned, and bedecked with souvenirs." The same authors sought out the dignity of the Boardwalk's commercial strip, claiming that "Architecturally the motifs are mixed, but functionally they unite in presenting a glittering, luxurious front." These writers highlighted the permanent displays of national advertisers, as well as the classy shops of the hotels' first floors.⁸

The New Jersey Chamber of Commerce in 1928 chose to compare Atlantic City's Boardwalk to "the gayest thoroughfares of the world." On the Boardwalk, "The vivacity and modernity of scene and action allure the eye of every visitor, and Atlantic City is encompassed by a constant holiday atmosphere." Even the Chamber's attempts to play up the Boardwalk's maritime dimensions paid tribute to commerce. "Unique among world institutions of this kind, the Boardwalk is described as analogous to the deck of an immense ocean liner, for the impression of being far out at sea is enhanced by the many 'steamer decks' with their 'steamer chairs' at the second story level, all overlooking boardwalk and ocean. Exhibits of merchandise and manufactured products line the miles of boardwalk. They are maintained for national advertising purposes, since people come here from everywhere."⁹

Hotels have long played a dominating role in Atlantic City's economy. The hotels grew as follows: 1890--500; 1912--1,000; 1928--1,200; 1948--361.¹⁰ Many of the largest

⁶ Charles E. Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea: The Rise and High Times of That Great American Resort, Atlantic City (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p.69, p.133.

⁷ The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey, Compiled and Written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of New Jersey (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1939), p.190.

⁸Ibid., p.192.

⁹ New Jersey--Life, Industries and Resources of a Great State (Newark, New Jersey: New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, 1928), p.213.

¹⁰ Fleming; Golden Age of the Monmouth County Shore; Chamber of Commerce; Butler's Book of the Boardwalk p.47.

masonry hotels evolved from the nineteenth century wood guest cottages.¹¹ Through the end of the nineteenth century, Atlantic City remained a wood-frame city, a "fairyland" of jigsaw, scrollwork, and color.¹² Only in 1892 did the city witness its first brick hotel, in 1899 the first brick hotels on the Boardwalk, and in 1906, the first hotel of reinforced concrete.¹³ The hotel giants--including the Chalfonte-Haddon Hall, the Claridge (1930), The Traymore (1915), and The Marlborough-Blenheim (1906)--were built or rebuilt between 1900 and 1930.¹⁴ Thus although Atlantic City's amusement pier business had distinguished the city beginning in the 1880s, the city did not set itself apart by its elegant, urban hotel construction until the twentieth century. Of course, inland metropolitan areas had been building grand masonry hotels for decades--so the question of why this style did not conquer the seaside earlier remains open.¹⁵ By 1928, the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce touted the "elegance and comfort" of the hotels; "Along the ocean's edge they rise massively and majestically and provide a fitting setting for the kaleidoscopic panorama which stretches before them."¹⁶ Despite the hotels' domination of the skyline and the economy, there were never more than 30 with Boardwalk addresses.¹⁷ And as one moved inland from the Boardwalk, the WPA Guide observed, older frame buildings--the small hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, and saloons--lay behind the Boardwalk's grand masonry facade.¹⁸

The amusement piers also comprised an essential part of the Boardwalk and Atlantic City's identity. Each pier presented a different mix of attractions. The first pier, Howard's Pier, constructed in 1882, had a pavilion for theater and vaudeville, but was destroyed in a storm later that year. Applegate's Pier opened in 1884, providing music and vaudeville, a picnic area, a parking lot for baby carriages, and an ice water fountain. The Iron Pier (1886) began by offering stage shows, but in 1898 it was sold to H.J. Heinz and Company and became the famous Heinz Pier. This pier established permanent

¹¹ Butler's Book of the Boardwalk, p.36. These included the Marlborough-Blenheim and the Traymore.

¹² Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea, pp. 19-20.

¹³ Butler's Book of the Boardwalk, pp.48-9.

¹⁴ Lee Eisenberg and Vicki Gold Levi, Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Publishers, ?), pp.37-43.

¹⁵ See George Thomas and Carl Doebley, Cape May, Queen of the Seaside Resorts: Its History and Architecture (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1976), for an explanation of why Cape May did not follow Atlantic City's lead in masonry hotel design.

¹⁶ New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey--Life, Industries and Resources of a Great State, p.213.

¹⁷ Butler's Book of the Boardwalk, p.47.

¹⁸ The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey, p.193.

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displays of the company's products, and gave away free samples. After opening in 1898, the Steel Pier entertained crowds with moving pictures, band and orchestra concerts; it hosted national conventions and commercial exhibits. Between the years 1928-1945 Steel Pier owner Frank Gravatt brought first-rate entertainment to three theaters he built in 1928. Young's Million Dollar Pier, opened 1906, offered an aquarium, ballroom, and twice-daily fish haul. Two years later Young built No. 1, Atlantic Ocean on the pier, 1700 feet from the Boardwalk. This one-and-a-half story Elizabethan cottage had nine rooms. George C. Tilyou operated a copy of his Coney Island Steeplechase park on a pier beginning in 1904. Virtually all of these piers were damaged or destroyed by fires or storms, and then rebuilt or demolished.¹⁹

What kinds of people visited Atlantic City, to enjoy the Boardwalk, hotels, and amusement piers? Historian Charles Funnell takes issue with the "myth" that Atlantic City was a posh destination attracting American elites, prior to a supposed decline in the 1930s. Closely associated with this myth is the belief, promoted by early Atlantic City publicists, that Atlantic City encouraged unusual social mixing. The 1885 guide, for example, claimed that on the Boardwalk, "such a conglomeration of all classes of society cannot be seen in any other seaside resort in the world."²⁰ Trying to convey the Boardwalk turmoil, the 1930s WPA Guide proposed that "here Somebodies tumble over other Somebodies and over Nobodies as well."²¹

Funnell reaches two significant conclusions about the nature of Atlantic City visitors from 1875 to 1910 which challenge these assumptions. First he argues that the "bluebloods," society's elites, did not visit Atlantic City in significant numbers. Funnell distinguishes between "high society" and the "nouveau bourgeois." Using hotel registers, the Social Register, and newspapers, Funnell determines that the latter group did visit the resort, not repelled by its garishness and commercialism. Second, he finds that Atlantic City appealed primarily to the lower middle class, the "lower white collar" worker. The seaside resort offered the illusion of mobility, status, and interaction with the upper classes. Atlantic City invited the fulfillment of social aspirations, perhaps best symbolized by the popular Boardwalk rolling chair. For a minimal sum, one could ride along the Boardwalk, propelled by another person of lower status--usually an African-American--and enjoy the accompanying sense of privilege. In Funnell's analysis, Atlantic City was less about social mixing than about the marketing of genteel class ideals. He points out that different parts of the Boardwalk were in fact geared towards

¹⁹ Butler, Butler's Book of the Boardwalk, pp. 15-20. One historian has found that Atlantic City entrepreneurs did not promote the city's mechanical amusements as aggressively as they promoted other attractions, possibly to minimize associations with Coney Island and declassé thrills. Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea, p.74.

²⁰ Burk and McFetridge, A Complete Guide To Atlantic City (Philadelphia, 1885), p.19.

²¹ The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey, p. 190.

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different classes of visitor groups (also noted in the 1885 guide).²²

It is also fruitful to consider the Atlantic City Boardwalk as a place of employment--the hotels, restaurants, and businesses. Herbert Foster has documented that the vast majority of the recreation industry's workforce was black--95% by 1900. From 1905 to 1925, 95% of the hotel workforce was African-American (a few hotels never hired black waiters--including the Traymore). He convincingly argues that the significance of black labor in building Atlantic City's success can hardly be underestimated. In 1915, blacks comprised 27% of Atlantic City's permanent population. At the turn of the century, whites expressed concern over the numbers of blacks in the city, and the opportunities for race mixing. African-Americans did lose ground during the early decades of the twentieth century, experiencing displacement by whites and increasing segregation; by 1932 only four or five hotels still employed black waiters. During the same years the residential ghetto (consolidated by 1905) offered business opportunities to blacks, and was the home of numerous organizations and a middle class. The new school segregation, for example, opened up teaching positions to African-Americans.²³

Racial segregation laid down a heavy law on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Although black servants had more freedom of movement, black tourists and hotel-recreation employees were restricted to a particular bathing area, and were excluded from many of the pavilions. The 1930s WPA Guide recorded that "By tacit understanding the Negroes frequent certain portions of the beach at certain hours," and mentions separate city tennis courts for blacks.²⁴ African-Americans sat in the balconies of the theaters and movie houses which permitted them access. Customarily, black tourists were encouraged to visit the resort at the beginning or end of the season, and if possible, off-season.

The Depression hit Atlantic City's hotels and general economy hard. By the mid-1930s the city was putting forward proposals to rebound--by redesigning for a more wealthy clientele. The city's first slum clearance and housing project was dedicated in 1937. By 1940, the year-round population began to decline. The federal government kept Atlantic City's businesses alive during World War II by using the resort as an Army Air Force training base; 47 of the biggest hotels were filled in this manner, and 500,000 servicemen would receive training there. The grand old hotels would not regain the cachet they had briefly enjoyed. Transportation innovations--namely the rise of the automobile--would contribute to the changing vacation preferences of Americans. As Funnell describes it, the railroad had encouraged people to recreate in "clusters;" meanwhile, the first autobridge had reached Atlantic City in 1926. Atlantic City's biggest population loss

²² Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea, especially Ch.2.

²³ Herbert James Foster, The Urban Experience of Blacks in Atlantic City, New Jersey: 1850-1915 (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, Dissertation, 1981).

²⁴ The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey, p. 189, p.194. The construction of the Claridge displaced the "black beach" from Indiana Avenue to Missouri. In the 1940s and 1950s this beach was known as Chicken Bone Beach. Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness, p.90.

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occurred between 1960 and 1970, when almost one third of the city's white population left. The casino gambling trade has brought a resurgence in the Boardwalk's popularity, but the longer-term implications of the casino trade for the Atlantic City community are ambiguous. As at the turn of the century, walking inland from the Boardwalk one experiences a similar decline in the environment's grandiosity.²⁵

Historian: Alison Isenberg, New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trails project, Summer 1992

Sources: Burk and McFetridge. A Complete Guide to Atlantic City, 1885.

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²⁵ Funnell, By the Beautiful Sea, Ch.6; Butler, Book of the Boardwalk, p.118.

The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey., Compiled and Written by the
Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of
New Jersey. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1939.

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